DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 129 695 SO 009 475

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TITLE	So You Want to Be a Discussion Leader: A Discussion with Group Leaders.
INSTITUTION	American Jewish Committee, New York, N.Y. Inst. on Pluralism and Group Identity.
SPONS AGENCY	National Endowment for the Humanities (NFAH), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	Jun 76
NOTE	6p.; For related documents, see SO 009 476-478
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Education; Discussion Experience; *Discussion Groups; Elementary Secondary Education; *Group Discussion; *Group Dynamics; *Guidelines; Higher Education; *Leadership Responsibility; Teacher Education

ABSTRACT

This guide deals with specific questions and answers concerning discussions and how to lead them. Instructions for group leaders explain effective seating arrangements, group size, and moderating procedures. Benefits of group discussion include increased self-expression, critical-thinking skills, tolerance of others' views, and realization of the complex nature of the "truth." These benefits develop through group dynamics of interaction, bargaining, compromise, and creativity. Resolving value conflicts and developing policies seem to be the usual purposes of discussion. Chairs should be arranged in a circle or semicircle in order to facilitate open discussion, and group size should be no larger than 15 to 20. Among problems which the discussion leader might encounter are cases of lagging discussion, domination by a minority, and getting off the topic. Suggestions for avoiding these situations are given. Conclusion of the discussion depends on the meeting's purpose. If agreement on a plan of action is required, one should try to reach concensus rather than alienate some group members. Discussion of how individuals' opinions have been altered may be useful, too. If the issue is to be discussed again, an agenda should be established. (AV)

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...SO YOU WANT TO BE A DISCUSSION LEADER: A DISCUSSION WITH GROUP LEADERS

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SO 009 475

June, 1976

Issued as part of the Project, "Bridge-Building Between Scholars and Chicago's Ethnic and Minority Communities." Supported by a grant from the American Issues Forum Chicago, a program of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Ronald Grossman
Project Director

A DISCUSSION FOR GROUP DISCUSSION LEADERS

So! You're going to be a group discussion leader! It's a job that most of us try to avoid. It means that we usually have to prepare more than the others. It means that we're usually more nervous than the others. And, it usually means that we have to be more alert and not as "free" during the meeting as the others. But...you've got the assignment and you're going to do your best. This one-way discussion is designed to help alleviate some of your concerns and to give you some hints that we hope will prove helpful to you in your unenviable task.

First, look at the bright side. Everyone, including educators, government officials, psychologists, and even philosophers, agree that group discussion is absolutely essential to both individual growth and the democratic process. The bargaining, interaction, compromise, and creativity that result from a discussion help the group and the individuals within it. The group gains because the combined knowledge and opinions of its members clarify and strengthen its position. Moreover, research indicates that individuals benefit from discussion in at least seven ways. They: 1) increase their ability to express themselves in a group; 2) add to their critical thinking skills; 3) gain knowledge through shared experiences; 4) gain increased tolerance for others' views; 5) learn to better analyze their own and others' points of view; 6) better realize that the "truth" is not simple, but complex and many-sided; and 7) gain motivation for increased participation in public issues. So, now that you see how much better off you, the group, and the group's members will be as a result of your discussion, you're eager and ready to go...aren't you?

The rest of this guide is devoted to specific questions and answers concerning discussions and how to lead them.

What types of issues and topics are best suited for discussions?

The two usual purposes for discussion are 1) for learning about issues and resolving value conflicts among group members; and 2) for developing policies or plans for action after group agreement on the issues. This means that simple factual issues are seldom good group discussion topics. Instead, open-ended topics, ones for which there are no clear-cut answers, lead to lively and useful discussions. For example, there would be little use in having a discussion about "what position did various interest groups take for and against the construction of Chicago's Crosstown Expressway? On the other hand, your group would probably have a good discussion if it had to decide whether to endorse one position or the other.

One of the best results of group discussion is the stimulation of divergent thinking. Discussion broadens each participant's intellectual horizons, helps clarify her or his own opinions, and measures one's own views against those of others.

Is there a "best" way to set up the room for discussion?

Discussion is improved and encouraged when the participants can see each other. Facial expressions and "body language" are as important as speech in many cases. So, put the chairs in a circle or semi-circle if at all possible. The leader should sit with the group--not in the middle or on a raised stage or standing up. This indicates that you are "part of the group" and encourages more open discussion. Any observers should be encouraged to join in. Don't let them stand against the walls or walk around the group.

What about the size of the group?

You need enough participants to generate divergent opinions--usually about six to eight. Any group larger than 15-20 begins to become unwieldy, although groups of 30-40 can be productive if handled well. One good way to deal with controversial issues in large groups is to break them into smaller groups of six to ten. Have them answer several questions or discuss the issues among themselves. Then, re-form into one group and ask one or two people from each smaller group to summarize the opinions stated and the group's concensus. This solves one of the main problems of groups that are too large--the need to allow everyone to express opinions and feel that he or she has made a contribution.

How do I start?

First, some "don'ts." Don't call for an early "vote" on an issue. That hardens everyone's position and will stifle further interaction. Don't give your opinion first. That will also reduce interaction and will divide the group into "agree with you" and "disagree with you" sides. A good way to begin would be to ask a member to state the issue as he or she perceives it and then to ask if anyone sees it differently. A few questions or issues in writing or on a chalkboard can also be used as an opening device. A discussion guide like this is especially helpful if you're going to use sub-groups.

What kind of problems might I encounter?

Every discussion will have some difficulties. Some of the more common ones and possible solutions are described below.

1. Getting off the topic. This is why we need you--the discussion leader. First, make sure that the seemingly irrelevant comments are just that. Ask the participant to relate the comment to the issue. You may have to say "I think that this is a little off the topic," and then look for another contributor. On the other hand, the group may want to pursue the new topic for a while. That's fine as long as they recognize it and agree to return to the main issue in a few minutes.

2. Domination by a minority. Some people are more verbal, or more angry, or more knowledgeable than others. You may have to overlook them and ask a quieter person a specific question. You may have to say something like "You've stated your position very well, Anne, but I'm interested in what Brenda (or the rest of the group) feels about the topic." Resist any attempts by the minority to force a decision prior to hearing all group members.

3. A lagging discussion. This is the fear of every group leader. In some cases, the participants aren't interested in the topic. Other times, they might be unprepared or fearful of talking in front of a group. One remedy is to ask a member to summarize what has been said. Then ask if anyone has anything to add. Another technique is to "personalize" the question. For example, if the discussion is about the use of phone wiretaps to deter crime, ask "Would you permit your phone to be tapped?" A third approach is to restate a general statement in such a way that it provokes discussion. For example, if a discussion about working mothers lags because everyone seems to be against it, you could ask "Are you saying that no mother should work outside the home?" Usually, the "exceptions" to the statement will result in increased group interaction.

4. A "too heated" discussion. On many issues, the problem is not "lagging" discussions, but ones that are so controversial that the problem is how to cool them down. An effective technique (frequently used in marital counseling) is to require each speaker to restate the previous speaker's position. For example, an angry, red-faced participant might say "Howard said that he supports forcing Spanish speaking children to speak and read from English language texts because it would encourage their acceptance by the Anglo majority. Well, I disagree because...." This technique not only cools down the discussion because it's time-consuming, but it also encourages listening to other views and eliminates some misconceptions. This technique can become tedious rather quickly, so use it carefully. Another approach is to ask a participant who is not too excited to state what he or she believes the conflict is. Don't ask the person to "side" with anyone--just state their perception of the argument. Then ask the conflicting individuals or groups if that is accurate. Usually, that will provide a "cooling-down" period. In some cases, you'll simply have to say, "This is counter-productive. We all need to calm down and speak more quietly."

How should the discussion conclude?

A lot depends on the meeting's purpose. If the idea is to agree on a plan of action, some sort of vote may be necessary, although good discussion leaders attempt to reach concensus rather than alienate some group

members. Asking for "summary statements" of the discussion is extremely helpful--especially if the topic will be discussed in the future. These should be put on a chalkboard and/or duplicated for distribution.

Another useful technique is to ask if anyone has had his/her opinion altered and in what ways. This illustrates both group and individual growth as a result of the discussion and makes the group realize that the meeting was important and helpful.

If the issue is to be discussed again, try to agree on an agenda, some assignments, or a few new questions that will be considered next time.

Finally, use all your influence to try to get out of being the discussion leader next time. You've done an outstanding job in a difficult task. It's somebody else's turn now.